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The Impact of Short-Term Cross-Cultural Experience on the Intercultural Competence of Participating Students: A Case Study of Australian High School Students

Wendy Nelson ¹ and Johannes M. Luetz ^{1,2,3,*}

¹ School of Social Sciences, Christian Heritage College (CHC), Brisbane, QLD 4122, Australia; wendy.nelson@chc.edu.au

² School of Social Sciences, University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia

³ School of Law and Society, University of the Sunshine Coast, Sippy Downs, QLD 4556, Australia

* Correspondence: jluetz@chc.edu.au; Tel.: +61-(0)7-3347-7932

Abstract: Over recent years, globalisation occasioned a dramatic rise in cross-cultural interactions until this was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The ability to competently engage in a multi-cultural world is often considered the “literacy of the future”. Global interconnectedness has brought studies into intercultural competence to centre stage. This has increased the demand for cross-cultural education experiences that facilitate such learning. However, there is a dearth of empirical research into the issues and effects surrounding short-term cross-cultural educational experiences for adolescents. This mixed-methods study extends previous research by looking specifically into what impact short-term cross-cultural experiences may have on the formation of intercultural competence (IC) and emotional intelligence (EI) of Australian high school students. This study used two instruments for measuring IC and EI in a pre- and post-test quasi-experimental design ($n = 14$), the General Ethnocentrism (GENE) Scale and Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ). Moreover, it conducted in-depth post-experience qualitative interviews ($n = 7$) that broadly followed a phenomenological paradigm of inquiry. The findings suggest that fully embodied cross-cultural immersive experiences can effectively support the formation of IC and EI in high school students and may thereby play a contributing role in redressing ignorance, xenophobia, prejudice, and discrimination. A greater understanding of the linkages between immersive cross-cultural experiences and intercultural competence offers prospects for policymakers, educators, pastoral carers, and other relevant stakeholders who might employ such experiential learning to foster more interculturally and interracially harmonious human relations.



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1. Introduction

Until recently, students were living in the most diverse, multicultural, interconnected, and rapidly changing time in human history. This global interconnectedness was significantly challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic in the early months of 2020 (OECD 2018; Nelson et al. 2019; Leal Filho et al. 2020; Ducharme 2020; WHO 2020). Evidently, limitations imposed by COVID-19 restrictions have significantly hampered the development of IC by “immersive experience”. There is hope that public health strategies and the worldwide roll-out of vaccines may permit a return to international immersive experiences (CDC 2021).

Global interconnectedness has raised transnational issues across the areas of business, trade, diplomacy, human rights, and environmental sustainability, among others. Domestically, these issues include encouraging multiculturalism; addressing xenophobia, racism and intolerance; and sustainable development. These issues, both nationally and

internationally, require a coordinated global response (Epprecht and Tiessen 2012). The challenge that this presents is addressed in the following quotation:

“Young people today must not only learn to participate in a more interconnected world but also appreciate and benefit from cultural differences. Developing a global and intercultural outlook is a process—a lifelong process—that education can shape”. (OECD 2018, p. 4)

The ability to competently engage in a multicultural world is often considered the “literacy of the future” (UNESCO 2013; OECD 2018). Global interconnectedness has brought studies into inter-cultural competence to centre stage (UNDP 2004; Bissessar 2018; Nelson et al. 2019). This concept of an intercultural worldview has remained prevalent and paramount to learning:

“This is a new kind of literacy, on a par with the importance of reading and writing skills or numeracy: *cultural literacy* has become the lifeline for today’s world . . . and an indispensable tool for transcending the clash of ignorances. It can be seen as part of a broad toolkit of worldviews, attitudes and competencies that young people acquire for their lifelong journey”. (UNESCO 2013, p. 5; emphasis original)

This has brought studies into intercultural competence (IC) to the forefront (Deardorff 2006, 2008, 2011, 2020). According to a report by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), schools “play a critical role in helping young people to develop global competence” (OECD 2018, p. 4). There have been initiatives among many educational institutions to consider prioritising the development of IC (McKinnon n.d.; Monash University 2018; UN News 2013; OECD 2018; Asia Education Foundation 2015).

This study intentionally focuses on the benefits of cultivating IC in high school students because at this stage of their development, young people are learning to think independently and to engage with global concepts such as culture, history, freedom, patriotism, and politics without difficulty and planning their future choices of career and university. Thus adolescence, ages 10–18, is widely considered to be an ideal time for cross-cultural experiences (APA 2002; Harvard University 2019; Lewis 2018; Polisar 2015; Lewis 2018; University of Rochester 2019; Scott and Cogburn 2019; Stanford Children’s Health 2019; Wallace-Broschious et al. 1994).

Until the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, immersive cross-cultural experiences, both in high schools and in universities, were on the rise in many nations, including in Australia (AUIDF 2015; Potts 2016; Ngo 2014; Campbell-Price 2014; Kitsantas 2004; Potts 2014; Epprecht and Tiessen 2012; Unger et al. 2021). The literature appears to converge around the synthesis that this field of study has been hampered by both lack of academic attention and absence of evidence-based data surrounding intercultural experiences in the high school context (Allison and Higgins 2002; Campbell-Price 2014). This lack of data suggests a need for further empirical research and provides justification for this study. This study aims to bridge this knowledge gap and contribute new insights to the development of cultural literacy, especially in a high school context (Dolby 2008). This research aims to answer the following question: What impacts do short-term cross-cultural experiences have on the formation and development of intercultural competence (IC) and emotional intelligence (EI) of Australian high school students? The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: Section 2 provides an overview of the study’s literary setting; Section 3 elaborates its methodology, including strategy, design, data collection and analysis; Section 4 reports results and key findings, which are then critically discussed in Section 5 in relation to the study’s contribution, limitations and arising opportunities for future research; finally, the conclusion presented in Section 6 synthesises prospects for interracial understanding.

2. Literature Overview

From an etymological perspective, global interconnectedness has required new terminology and given rise to a growing family of concepts. Deardorff (2006, 2008), in collaboration with other leading scholars (UNESCO 2013), promulgated a consensus definition as the first evidence-based framework for intercultural competence (IC), conceptualising IC as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Deardorff 2006, p. 247–48). Popular scholarship has adapted her original definition with the following rendition: “Intercultural competence is the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills, and attitudes that lead to visible behaviour and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions” (McKinnon n.d.; Deardorff 2006, pp. 241–66). This study follows Deardorff’s conceptual definition of IC.

Another leader in the field of intercultural understanding is Geert Hofstede. He developed a model that consists of six dimensions of culture, which he defined as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede 2011, p. 3). The six cultural dimensions each represent preferences for one perspective over another. They are power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, long term versus short-term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint (Hofstede 2011). For intercultural interactions, these six dimensions serve as a concise and accessible tool for developing an understanding of different cultures, values, and beliefs. Furthermore, they provide detailed insight into how humans may more sensitively engage, communicate, and act with IC (Hofstede 2001).

The literature review illuminated several themes across the research into cross-cultural experiences and their effects on participants. Most research broadly supports the notion that cross-cultural experiences can positively impact the IC formation of participants. Such experiences facilitate greater respect for cultural difference and can increase tolerance that positively alters the attitudes, perceptions, and knowledge of multiculturalism, cultural identity, civic engagement, diplomacy, global citizenship and global development in participants (Dwyer 2004a; Ehrlich 1997; Zamastil-Vondrova 2011; Zimmermann and Neyer 2013; Potts 2014; OECD 2018; Kitsantas 2004). Potts (2014) claimed that these findings also apply in the Australian context and may offer both individual and societal benefits:

“Australian students construct identity and move towards global citizenship through spending time in multiple contexts . . . when connected with the social context, these outcomes expand from individual to society as a whole”. (Potts 2014, pp. 12, 19; cf. Dolby 2008)

Relatedly, language teacher Picardo (2012) claimed,

“Global awareness and international collaboration during formative years result in more rounded individuals, encouraging our pupils to see things from different perspectives and helping them to make informed decisions, acquiring transferable skills that will be useful to them and will remain with them for life”. (para. 5)

Further, Lilley et al. (2015) found that Australian students who spend time in multiple learning environments and “out of the comfort zone” (p. 229) experiences develop a global outlook of comparative thinking and knowledge across cultural and interpersonal barriers, and this increases their global networks and makes them more effective global citizens. Furthermore, studies have reported that IC cannot be fully grasped in a classroom but is rather attained through processes of experiential learning (Potts 2016; Epprecht and Tiessen 2012).

The literature also revealed a link between intercultural experiences and the cultivation of emotional intelligence (EI), demonstrating that these experiences also impinge on the development of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive domains (Potts 2016; cf. Armstrong 2012). According to Mayer et al. (2008), EI is the ability to carry out sophisticated

information processing about emotions and emotion-relevant stimuli and to use this information as a guide to thinking and behaviour (p. 503). Goleman (1995) added to this definition by stating that there are four key components of EI: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social management.

Not only did these immersive experiences create opportunities for emotional and academic serendipitous learning, many students considered that these experiences were the highlight of their education (Costello 2020). When surveyed by Zamastil-Vondrova (2011), 22 of 23 students reported that studying abroad was “the defining moment of their education, the single most important aspect of their education, the best thing that ever happened to them and that studying overseas was unforgettable” (p. 5).

Research further suggests that trips abroad influence the career choice of participants. In a large-scale survey conducted by Dwyer (2004a), 63 percent of participants stated that “learning abroad influenced their decision to expand or change academic majors and 62 percent reported that learning abroad ignited an interest in a career direction” (Potts 2016, p. 13). Relatedly, in an impact study by Brandenburg et al. (2014), 87–92 percent of students reportedly had “a better idea what [they] want to do after graduation” (p. 110) due to participation in such experiences. Furthermore, Potts (2016) records that 69 percent of students rated their experience abroad “as worthwhile or very worthwhile for increasing their motivation and passion for their chosen career direction” (p. 13). Relatedly, research into study abroad found that the largest reported difference was in career impact (Dwyer 2004b).

The literature search also highlighted that potential employers seemingly desire candidates with cross-cultural experiences over those without (Potts 2016; Zarnick 2010; OECD 2018; Epprecht and Tiessen 2012). Moreover, in a global study conducted by Molony et al. (2011), 63 percent of employers stated that, when recruiting, they desired participants with international educational experience. This was because employers associated such experiences with key workplace characteristics such as tolerance, respect, open-mindedness, empathy, responsibility, and initiative (Crossman and Clarke 2009). Furthermore, intercultural experiences can accelerate employment after graduation and reduce overall unemployment for participants (Potts 2016).

Due to increasing demand for cross-cultural experiences, short-term programs have emerged as a popular alternative to longer-term experiences. Short-term programs typically involve more accessible destinations, lower costs, and decreased demands on time (Potts 2016). According to the Institute for International Education (IIE 2015), in the US, 62 percent of experiences were short-term, and, in Australia, around 55 percent of programs were under 10 weeks of duration (AUIDF 2015). Notwithstanding, some academic debate remains on the relative value of short-term experiences compared to semester or longer programs. According to The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE 2007),

“The amount of time one is abroad is not as important as whether a student has such an experience. This suggests that there is value in increasing the number of short-term cross-cultural or ‘study away’ opportunities for students”. (p. 17)

Some literature clearly supports the notion that a well-designed short-term experience can have significant long-term benefits for participants (Dwyer 2004b; Shiveley and Misco 2015).

As intercultural educational programs proliferate, so too must the educators’ ability to measure their efficacy (Greenholtz 2010). Leading thinkers in the field of intercultural understanding have developed widely used and accepted models for intercultural interaction. Table 1 provides a visual overview of selected measurements of IC and EI that are well established in the literature.

Table 1. Instruments for measuring intercultural competence and emotional intelligence.

Milton Bennett—Development Mole of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)
The DMIS looks at IC as a progressive and developmental process (Bennett 1986, 1993, 2004). The DMIS is based upon a constructivist view and reflects how one's world is formed in terms of understanding cultural differences between oneself and other distinct groups (Pedersen 2009; see also Bennett 1986, 1993, 2004).
Mitchel Hammer—Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)
Based on the work of Bennett, Hammer developed the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). It is “constructed to measure the orientations toward cultural differences described in the DMIS. The result of this work is a 50-item (with 10 additional demographic items) paper-and-pencil measure of intercultural competence” (Hammer et al. 2003, p. 421). Hammer (2012) states, “The IDI has been rigorously tested and has cross-cultural generalizability both internationally and with domestic diversity” (p. 117).
Emotional Intelligence—Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Scale (MSCEIS)
The Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT) is an ability-based test designed to measure the four branches of EI described in their model. The four levels of the MSCEIS are perceiving, using, understanding and managing emotions (Salovey and Grewal 2005). MSCEIT uses the format of intelligence testing to measure the emerging scientific understanding of emotions and their function, specifically EI. The MSCEIT consists of 141 items and takes approximately 30–45 min to complete (Salovey et al. 2003).
Empathy—The Toronto Empathy Scale (TEQ)
The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) was developed by researchers Spreng, McKinnon, Mar and Levine, who created a self-report measure to assess empathy efficiently and reliably as an emotional process (Spreng et al. 2009). The finished product is the TEQ, “a self-report style, uni-dimensional, 16-item, five-point Likert type scale developed to assess the empathy levels of individuals” (Totan et al. 2012, p. 179).
Neuliep and McCroskey—Gene Ethnocentrism Scale (GENE)
The GENE comprises 21 items, 11 worded positively and 10 worded negatively, and was developed to reflect a conceptualisation of ethnocentrism that may be experienced by anyone, regardless of culture. The GENE scale is one of the leading instruments of ethnocentrism among social scientists (Neuliep 2002; Neuliep and McCroskey 2009; Keith 2013).

From an ethical perspective, intercultural learning experiences can enhance moral development, the understanding of ethical issues, and commitment to social justice issues (Sax and Astin 1997; Potts 2016; Epprecht and Tiessen 2012). Even so, Epprecht and Tiessen (2012) warn of a potential power imbalance that can occur between the visiting and visited culture if the participants are motivated purely by their own learning and the need to quench a moral desire and that this can lead to an unintended “narcissistic approach to activism” (Andreotti 2011, p. 151). This has incited some ethical discourse on the topic (Epprecht and Tiessen 2012). Even so, while quenching a moral desire may not be the intention of such experiences, drawing attention to this issue and inviting debate on the purpose of the experience can be a crucial step in the planning and implementation of such trips (Epprecht and Tiessen 2012).

The cost of travelling has also been highlighted as ethically problematic because it limits the population that can access such an experience (Allison and Higgins 2002; Epprecht and Tiessen 2012). Therefore, educators have been enjoined to avoid cross-cultural experiences becoming “a rite of passage or holidays for the wealthy upper-middle class, dressed up to be education to ease the conscience” (Allison and Higgins 2002, p. 24).

There has also been discussion among youth experience providers on the need for greater regulation and professionalism. Allison and Higgins (2002) have suggested that the potential accreditation of these trips could help mitigate ethical issues and contribute to the overall safety and quality of intercultural experiences. When planning these trips, educators need to consider these and other ethical concerns (Epprecht and Tiessen 2012).

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Strategy and Design

The methodology used in this research is a mixed-methods design to investigate whether and how short-term cross-cultural experiences influence the IC formation of Australian high school students. The research population comprised 14 Grade 7–12 (one male and 13 female) students aged between 12–17 years and 2 trip leaders from an Australian Public State High School who collectively participated in a short-term cross-cultural experience to Myanmar (26 December–4 January 2020), called “The Myanmar Experience”. According to the literature, a duration of 5–12 days is an appropriate length of time for such “short-term” trips (Wood and Peters 2013; Fairchild et al. 2006; Engle and Crowne 2013; Costello 2020). Lasting 9 days, the Myanmar experience falls within this “short-term” definitional range¹.

As a participant in the Deeper Learning Global Competencies (DLGC 2019) framework, the high school had been recognized for leading in Student Focused Learning. The DLGCs comprise the following six values: character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. Under this framework, the school initiated a focus question, “How can you leave the world a better place?” Over time, this framework and question became the incubator for “The Myanmar Experience”.

Pre-briefing played an important role in preparing the students for the experience. This process included online sessions with their hosts in Myanmar, which established appropriate expectations. Upon arriving in Myanmar, participants stayed at the local school (it was the holiday period) and slept on mats on the floor. During the day, the participants were involved with charitable work at a youth development centre in Yangon. They ate there and engaged with the children that attended. Participants also visited local villages.

To collect the quantitative data, this study used a quasi-experimental method based on a one-group pre-test/post-test design (Babbie 2021). The quasi-experimental method “seeks to determine if a specific treatment influences an outcome” (Bryman 2016, p. 12). This design is not a true experimental model because there is no control group (Leedy and Ormrod 2015). The qualitative component of this research broadly followed a phenomenological paradigm of inquiry by providing an in-depth analysis of this experience. This design of inquiry allowed the research to “describe the lived experiences of individuals” (Creswell 2014, p. 14) and to attain a better understanding “how individuals make sense of the world around them” (Bryman 2016, p. 26).

The trip leaders facilitated daily debriefing and reflection times and encouraged the participants to share their “highlights” and “lowlights”. Participants also used a journal to process and reflect on their daily experiences. This reflective process gave participants the space to consider the impact the experience was having on them and prepared them to communicate this impact during post-trip interviews.

3.2. Data Collection

3.2.1. Stage One: Pre-Data Collection Phase

Stage One comprised three steps. The first step involved sourcing a group of high school students who were participating in a cross-cultural experience. The second step was gaining Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) approval from a nationally accredited HREC provider and additionally from Queensland Education Research Inventory (QERI). Once obtained, the third step involved gaining informed consent from the school and the participants and their parents/guardians as they were under 18. Planning also included information sessions for participants, guardians, and the school.

3.2.2. Stage Two: Data Collection Phase

The second stage of the data collection process was the data collection phase. Using a mixed-methods design, the data were collected in two parts as follows:

The first step involved quantitative data collection. This research used two existing instruments, the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) (Spreng et al. 2009) and the General Ethnocentrism Scale (GENE) (Neuliep and McCroskey 2009). These instruments are well-established, efficient, user-friendly, and considered to have strong validity and reliability (Neuliep 2002; Spreng et al. 2009; Totan et al. 2012). The TEQ has 16 questions, rated on a Likert scale from “never” to “often” (Spreng et al. 2009). The GENE Scale was designed by Neuliep and McCroskey (2009) to measure ethnocentricity and consists of 22 statements concerning the participants’ culture and other cultures. The participants rated statements on a 5-point Likert scale (Neuliep and McCroskey 2009). The questionnaires were administered for both pre- and post-experiences, the differences noted, and a paired *t*-test was applied to test for statistical significance. According to Henry Hsu and Peter A. Lachenbruch (2005), the paired *t*-test is used to compare mean differences between treatments where the observations have been obtained in pairs. The difference between the paired values is assumed to be normally distributed, and the null hypothesis that the expectation is zero is tested by Student’s *t*-test.

The second step involved qualitative data collection. This took place in two parts.

Part One involved semi-structured interviews with five selected participants and sought to measure the impact of the short-term cross-cultural experience on the IC formation of participants. These interviews were conducted after the experience, and the answers were noted. All interviews were audio-recorded. The participants chosen were the five who had the greatest differences in the GENE Scale results, as found from the quantitative data analysis. Interview questions were based on the participants’ answers to the quantitative questionnaires and used multiple structured questions that pertain to IC and EI. In agreement with common qualitative data analysis practice, “the researcher is essentially the main ‘measurement device’ in the study” (Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 7).

Part Two of the qualitative data collection process involved post-experience interviews of the two trip leaders. Both trip leaders were interviewed about perceived changes in the participants’ behaviours and attitudes. This provided a form of secondary data based on the leaders’ observations of the participants and allowed the triangulation and cross-checking of the results (Bryman 2016, p. 697). The observations were also audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed. In total, seven interviews were conducted: Part One engaged five selected participants, and Part Two consulted the two trip leaders.

3.3. Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analysed using standard descriptive and inferential statistics. To test the statistical significance of the difference in scores between the before and after sets, the data were entered into the IBM SPSS statistics program. The qualitative study component broadly followed a phenomenological research paradigm and entailed standard thematic analysis (Babbie 2021). Thematic data analysis facilitated “the extraction of key themes” (Bryman 2016, p. 697) through coding and indexing (Babbie 2021). Furthermore, and owing to the subjective nature of qualitative data, the findings were subsequently validated by computer software, which offered a kind of third-party triangulation (Burnard et al. 2008). After coding, transcripts were edited to fit the required format for analysis by the Leximancer Concept Explorer software program, the preferred instrument for in-depth text analysis (Leximancer 2020).

4. Results and Key Findings

This section will first give an overview of the quantitative data (Section 4.1) from the two questionnaires, the General Ethnocentrism (GENE) Scale and the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ), and then summarise the semi-structured interviews and report the coding phase of the qualitative data analysis (Section 4.2). The findings broadly support the research hypothesis that such an experience can reduce ethnocentricity in young people.

4.1. Quantitative Results

The GENE Scale found that 12 participants reflected a less ethnocentric mindset following their overseas experience, one reflected a similar mindset as before, and one did not complete the survey. To test the hypothesis for the before (GENE_B: $M = 26.33$, $SD = 4.89$) and after (GENE_A: $M = 22.42$, $SD = 5.48$) data sets, a paired samples t -test was performed. Prior to conducting the analysis, the assumption of normally distributed differences was examined using the Shapiro–Wilk test. The test indicated that the scores were normally distributed. For the GENE_B scores, $W(12) = 0.861$, $p = 0.051$; for the GENE_A scores, $W(12) = 0.955$, $p = 0.707$.

The null hypothesis was rejected as the results from the GENE Scale indicated that the paired samples t -test score for the GENE questionnaire was statistically significant. These findings broadly support the research hypothesis that such an experience can reduce ethnocentric ideation in young people, with $t(11) = 3.1$, $p = 0.010$ (Figure 1). Cohen's d was estimated at 0.75, which is a large effect based on Cohen (1992) guidelines. See Figure 2 for the presentation of the effect size of the paired samples t -test.

Data Set 1 - GENE Score Before and After						
Paired Samples Statistics						
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	
Pair 1	GENE_B	26.33	12	4.89	1.41	
	GENE_A	22.42	12	5.48	1.58	

Paired Samples Correlations				
		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	GENE_B & GENE_A	12	0.649	0.022

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	GENE_B - GENE_A	3.92	4.38	1.26	1.13	6.70	3.10	11	0.010

Figure 1. The null hypothesis for equal scores is rejected.

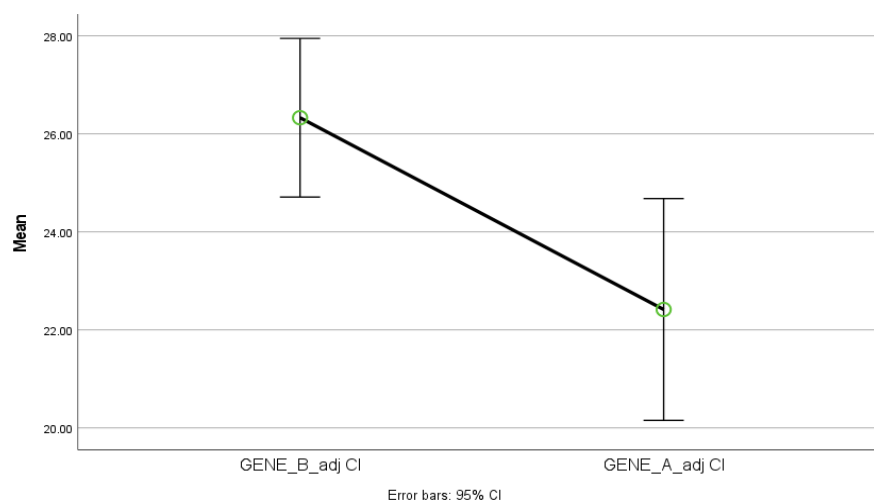


Figure 2. Adjusted 95% confidence interval for the two groups.

Owing to the small population sample, these results might be treated with caution. Notwithstanding, these quantitative data sets do suggest that the short-term cross-cultural experience may have played a contributing role in decreasing ethnocentric ideation.

The results of the TEQ questionnaire, administered to the same 13 participants, produced a more divergent picture, with six students achieving a higher empathy score on the second test than the first, five others achieving a lower score on the second test, and one reflecting no change. Thus, based solely upon these TEQ scores, it would appear that the positive and negative gains were nearly analogous. Consequently, TEQ test results were inconclusive, neither supporting nor refuting the original hypothesis. Even so, subsequent discussions with staff and students suggested that the validity of the TEQ data may have been affected by issues of comprehension since some respondents reported difficulties with the wording of some of the questions, particularly those involving double negatives. Such difficulties with the TEQ may relate to its original design for use with university students (Sprenge et al. 2009).

Unlike results for the GENE questionnaire, output for the TEQ showed only a small difference that is not of any statistical significance. Consequently, the TEQ data set did not meet the researchers' standard for reliability and validity and was ultimately discounted in the final analysis as being essentially inconsequential in respect of the study's aims and conclusions.

4.2. Qualitative Results

The manual coding process created the basis for the qualitative analysis. This process identified 18 different themes. This coding is visually represented below (Table 2).

Table 2. Visual summary of qualitative coding. RCN = raw coding number; PN = participant number.

RCN	Name of Category	PN5	PN10	PN11	PN12	PN13	Total
1	Previous travel	x		x		x	3
2	Increased gratitude	x	x	x	x	x	5
3	Motivation and gratefulness for education	x		x	x		3
4	Gratitude and happiness of Myanmar people	x	x	x	x	x	5
5	Religious observations		x		x		2
6	Perceived attitudes of general Australian culture	x	x	x	x	x	5
7	The experience was beneficial	x	x	x	x	x	5
8	Recommending the experience to others	x	x	x	x	x	5
9	Increased empathy or desire to help people	x	x	x	x		4
10	Global perspective	x	x	x			3
11	Influence on career choice or direction		x	x	x		3
12	Post-trip changes made in Australia	x	x	x	x	x	5
13	Better understanding of other cultures	x	x		x	x	4
14	Connection with children in Myanmar	x	x	x	x	x	5
15	Lack of essentials in Myanmar challenging	x	x	x	x	x	5
16	Human connection and community	x	x	x	x	x	5
17	Learned something new about themselves	x	x	x	x	x	5
18	Attitudes of others before and after experience		x	x	x		3
Total		15	16	16	16	12	75

As displayed in Table 2, the theme pertaining to raw coding number (RCN) 5 was commented on by two students; RCNs 1, 3, 10, 11 and 18 were commented on by three students; RCNs 9 and 13 were commented on by four students; and RCNs 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 12, 14, 15, 16 and 17 were commented on by all five students.

Due to the subjective nature of qualitative data, the research incorporated both manual and computer-generated coding to confirm data validity. Once manual coding had been performed, the transcripts were then edited and entered into the Leximancer Concept Explorer program, which generated in-depth text analysis (Leximancer 2020). Concept maps and frequency tables are shown below (Figures 3 and 4). Themes on the concept maps are heat-mapped: “hot” colours (red, orange) denote the most prevalent themes, and “cool” colours (blue, green) denote those less prominent (Leximancer 2020).

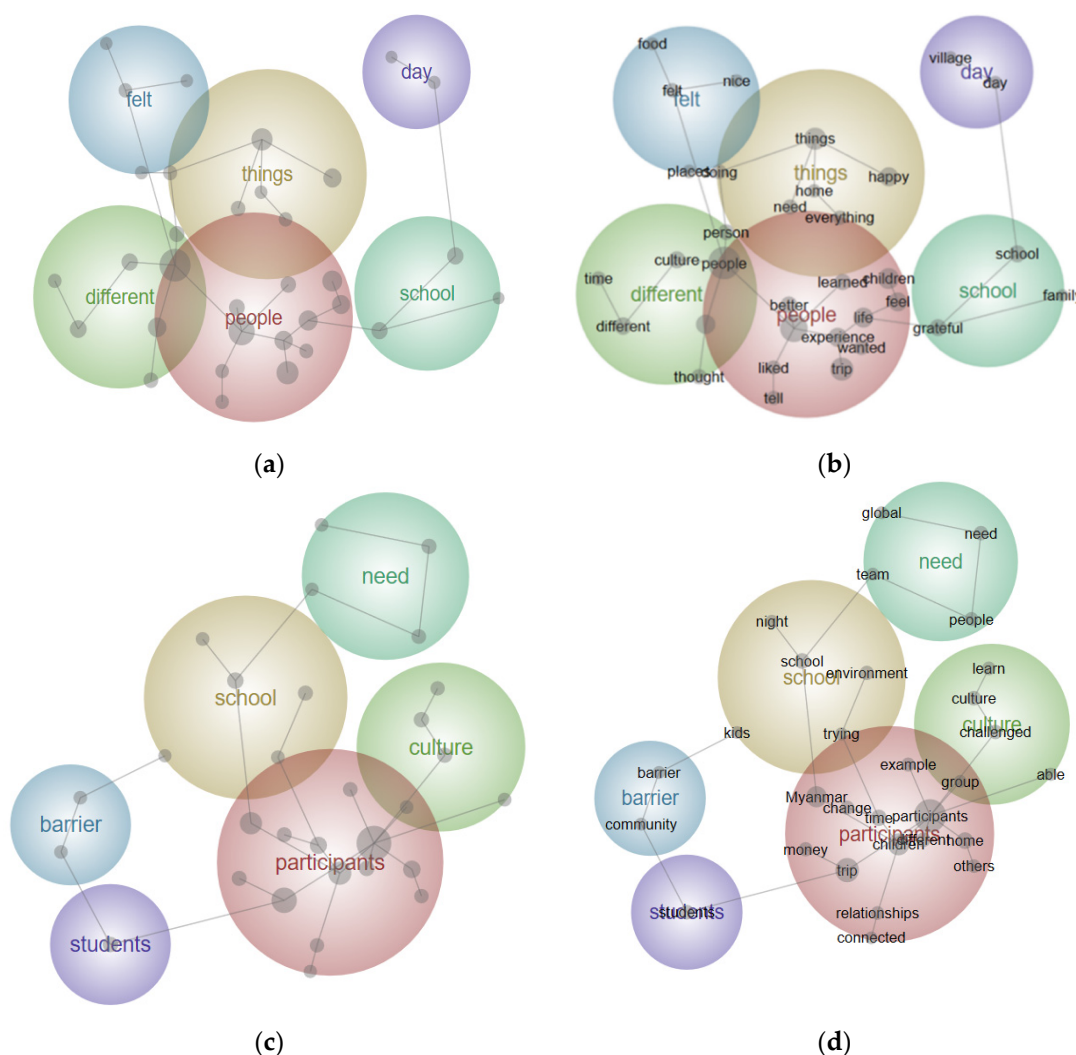


Figure 3. (a) Basic concept map participant interviews; (b) detailed concept map participant interviews; (c) basic concept map leader interviews; (d) detailed concept map leader interviews.

Figure 3a,b shows the main themes from the student interviews, and Figure 4a depicts how frequently these themes occur. Figure 3c,d and Figure 4b reflect the equivalent information for the leader interviews. Figure 3b,d displays a more detailed view, where the words frequently associated with each concept are overlaid. For example, from the interviews, it was evident that the students were not only grateful for the people they met during the experience but also more grateful for the opportunity to go to school. This is reflected in the corresponding concept map (Figure 3b) since the word “grateful” is close to the “people” bubble, where it is connected to the word “life” but positioned on the edge of the “school” bubble, where it is connected to “school” and “family”. The concept map demonstrates what the students were grateful for and how their gratitude connects to the multiple overarching concepts.

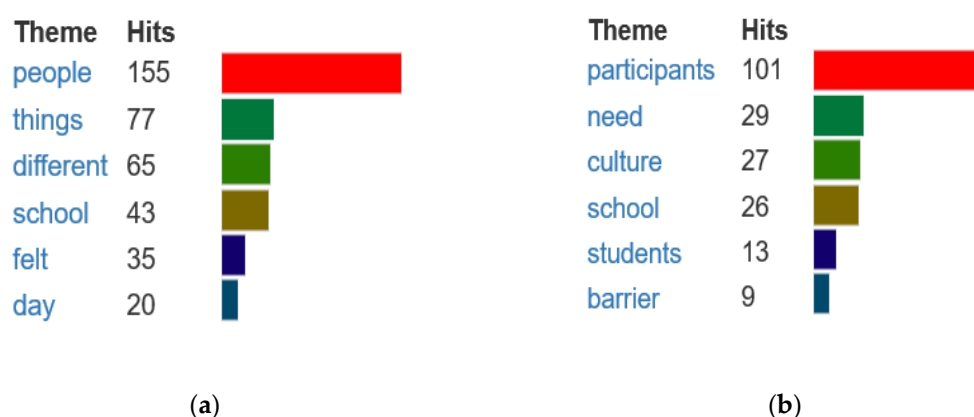


Figure 4. (a) Frequency table participant interviews; (b) frequency table leader interviews.

Both the manual and computer-generated coding unearthed similar themes. This congruency demonstrates the validity and reliability of the coding process in relation to the qualitative data. The impact of the experience was apparent from the participants' level of self-reflection and readiness to articulate changes within themselves. Although students may not have specifically stated that they had grown in IC or EI, thematic interview analysis reflected this phenomenon. This section reports six key themes (KTs) that were synthesised from the coding. These KT's were distilled while comparing and categorizing the manual and computer-generated data analysis: (1) Sensitisation to happiness and contentment; (2) sensitisation to community; (3) sensitisation to learning and education; (4) sensitisation to culture; (5) an overarching sense of gratitude; (6) the importance of the immersive experience. Table 3 displays the relationship between the raw coding numbers (RCNs) from Table 2 and the six distilled key themes (KTs). The relationship between these six themes and the research hypothesis is explored in Section 5.

Table 3. Visual summary of relationship between raw coding numbers (RCNs) and distilled key themes (KTs).

RCN	KT1	KT2	KT3	KT4	KT5	KT6
1			x	x		
2			x		x	x
3			x		x	x
4	x			x		x
5				x		
6				x		
7			x	x		x
8			x		x	x
9	x	x		x		x
10			x	x		x
11			x			x
12	x		x	x	x	x
13		x	x	x		x
14	x	x	x	x	x	x
15	x		x		x	x
16		x		x		
17	x	x	x	x	x	x
18			x	x		
Total	6	5	13	13	7	13

Key Theme 1. *Sensitisation to Happiness and Contentment.*

The participants' interview responses indicated that the experience had increased their ability to process emotionally relevant stimuli and apply these to their lives. During the

interviews, the students expressed and externally processed their experiences, emotions, and life applications as a response to the cross-cultural experience.

One of the strongest themes that emerged from both the participant and leader interviews was the participants' connection with the children at the orphanage in Myanmar. The trip leaders stated that when the students were asked about their "highlight of the day", it was "always the kids, the kids, the kids, the kids" (Trip Leader Interview). The trip leader stated they "selflessly loved" the children at the orphanage and recurrently asked, "what else can we do?" Participants were seemingly interrogating questions of happiness and also aspects of their western cultural obsession with materialism. This was expressed through sentiments like,

"They had so much less stuff than we have . . . I was wondering whether we are doing things right in spending so much money on entertainment items and things like that, which we do not really need . . . we could just try and spend more money on helping people who need help as opposed to making the lives easier for those who already have a good life". (P3)

The students also reflected on the surprise of meeting people in Myanmar living without what some Australians might perceive as essentials. Participants commented on how happy the people were despite their lack of resources and material assets. One participant commented on a specific experience that changed their way of thinking;

"Just seeing all the kids. They were very happy in . . . I don't know, just in their situation, I guess, but they were the happiest people I've ever seen. Most people over here [in Australia] that are like . . . they've got so much more but they are still so unhappy and complaining about what they don't have, and not really grateful for what they do have". (P10)

Participants were seemingly astounded by the concept of happiness and contentment apart from material possession and felt that this concept could improve Australian culture. The happiness of the children in Myanmar made one Australian student question, "Do we actually have it right here?" (P3). Overall there was a sense that the participants returned home with a reimagined and expansive understanding of happiness and contentment, summarised in the following comments; "The biggest one that stands out was when we went to the poorer village . . . they didn't get what we have, but they're still as happy as can be . . . maybe beforehand I would have just gone through life thinking, oh I need more things to be better or more happy" (P3).

The views reported here clearly relate not only to self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management, cited as key components of EI by [Goleman \(1995\)](#), but also to Deardorff's three key constituents of IC: knowledge, skills, and attitudes ([Deardorff 2006](#)). Furthermore, there is significant support in the literature for the idea that happiness arises from manifold unconventional and multiplex pursuits that are distinct from the ubiquitous quest for consumption and economic development ([Quak and Luetz 2020](#)).

Key Theme 2. Sensitisation to Community.

The intercultural experience also challenged the students' understanding of community. The community collaboration they observed in Myanmar strongly contrasted with their perceived lack of community in Australia. The students viewed this community collaboration as a positive aspect of Myanmar culture, with one participant stating, "maybe we're just not brought together as a community as much as them . . . we just do what we want and we don't collaborate" (P3). The participant felt that Australians could learn to "focus more on just being a community and working together to do things" (P3).

One participant commented that in Australia people are “definitely more shut off than [in Myanmar]”. They expanded, saying that in Australia, “our mindsets are more thinking for the future, and how we can improve” (P13). It was apparent that the student was attempting to explain the Australian culture’s apparent tendency to privilege individualistic pursuits at the expense of the joy found in a communal process. The participant asserted that Australians need to “focus on just being a community and working together to do things” (P3).

This idea of sensitisation to community was highlighted in a story shared by one of the trip leaders. While the leader initially had difficulty finding students who were willing to volunteer in the “Cash for Containers” recycling program at their school ([Envirobank Recycling 2020](#)), after returning from Myanmar, several of the participants were more available to help and get involved. Incidentally, from an international community engagement perspective, the school has agreed that all money raised from this program will go to the orphanage in Myanmar. This was attractive to the students who travelled to Myanmar, both because they had seen where the money would go and how it could be used and because they saw how a small amount of money could make a significant difference in Myanmar.

Key Theme 3. Sensitisation to Learning and Education.

The qualitative data reflected the term “school” as being frequently mentioned; it featured prominently for both participants (Figure 3a,b) and leaders (Figure 3c,d). This may be for two reasons. First, the whole trip was in the context of a school excursion. Second, during the interviews, it became apparent that the students were using the word “school” to embrace the more general concepts of education and learning. It thus appeared legitimate to include education as one of the key themes distilled from the findings. The participants specifically commented on their increased appreciation for their own education. During this experience, they saw how significantly the children in Myanmar valued education. The participants became aware that education, while a human right, is often only readily accessible by the financially privileged. One participant expressed:

“Going over there and realising that the kids, like they go to school, and they learn English and everything, and unlike here they’d probably be a lot more nicer to their teachers because they realise it’s a great opportunity to be able to go to school.” (P5)

Another student similarly stated,

“That’s the other thing I have learned from this trip is to be more grateful about school. Like I was, oh I don’t want to go to school because we have school right at our fingertips. As for them [children in Myanmar], they have to travel ages and ages to get to school, and that just made me go, we’re actually really lucky to have school. When we have school, we can go to Uni, and then we do get those better opportunities.” (P13)

Another participant expressed how education not only benefited their own life trajectory but could also improve the lives of others,

“I feel I can’t help anyone if I don’t have the skills, I can’t do anything. So, it’s motivated me to keep going through school, get through our system and get through Uni and all that. And then I can help.” (P11)

Overall, there seemed to be a marked difference in the appreciation shown by students for their learning and education before and after their experience in Myanmar. Several comments demonstrated the participants’ newfound appreciation for education. As such, KT3 highlights the importance of the immersive experience and how “sensitisation” tends to not only enhance knowledge, skills, and attitudes as components of IC ([Deardorff 2006](#)) but may even be perceived as a fourth element for the development of IC and EI.

Key Theme 4. Sensitisation to Culture.

Culture was another important theme raised by the Leximancer analysis (Figure 3). All participants commented on how the trip improved their understanding of other cultures. One participant, who lives and works in a town with a large Filipino population, stated that before the trip,

“I was just a little nervous whenever I would have to serve them or something, in case I’d do something offensive or say something offensive. And now that I’ve been over there [Myanmar] and experienced that, I’m just a little bit more understanding.” (P11)

It seemed the participant was more at ease around people from a different culture (in their own cultural context) following the cross-cultural experience. That same participant also commented that differences in culture are “not wrong, just different” (P11). Relatedly, students also seemingly displayed greater understanding or acceptance of cultural differences:

“I definitely have more of an open mind on things . . . I feel that if more people had an open mind on things, then there wouldn’t be as much conflict, or people would get along more. Maybe people would be as loving and giving, like the people over there, rather than over here, everyone being more shut off.” (P10)

Seemingly, the experience provided participants with some key parameters to develop an expansive understanding of culture.

Key Theme 5. *An Overarching Sense of Gratitude.*

During interviews, participants expressed an increase in personal gratitude. They expressed gratitude for what many Australians consider necessities such as clean water, health care, choice and quality of food, basic hygiene, and shelter. They expressed gratitude for having friends and family. This was exemplified in numerous such statements,

“Just being grateful for everything I am given, I’m just a lot more happier to be who I am and everything . . . I think it [the trip] just opened my eyes to how grateful I should be for what I have and not be so ungrateful of the resources I can access.” (P5)

This overarching sense of gratefulness that many participants described is aptly transliterated in the following sentiment: “Now that I have gone [to Myanmar], I realise it’s more about how you think and feel about things than what you have” (P3). Once again, the interrelationships between happiness and gratitude, noted earlier in relation to the key concepts of IC and EI, seem to be a recurrent phenomenon.

Key Theme 6. *The Importance of the Immersive Experience.*

Overall, there was a sense that IC and EI might be more effectively acquired through immersive experience rather than from a textbook, online, or in a classroom. As school-based educators, both leaders reflected on the educational value of this experience for their students. They both expressed the view that the values, experiences, and perspectives gained from this trip could not be readily taught in a classroom. Similar sentiments were expressed by a participant who stated, “you can’t learn it from a book or a photo, you have to go into it” (P13). Relatedly, another participant elaborated the benefit of the experience as follows,

“It’s kind of hard because of things you learn, and you realise they didn’t understand it because they haven’t gone . . . so most people, most of my mates wouldn’t find it beneficial, me telling them . . . you’ll learn gratitude and people connection . . . You need to do it”. (P3)

The participant also commented that one should advertise such trips based on “fun” rather than based on “human connection”, which would not work as well in this context (P3). This is because in the mind of the participant, the impact of human connection could not be prospectively grasped, only retrospectively, which underscores the importance of

lived transnational experiences for acquiring sociocultural understandings (Klingenberg et al. 2020; Getz 2020; Nelson and Luetz 2021).

It was apparent from the excitement shown by the students during interviews that they enjoyed their experience and desired that their peers would enjoy similar experiences. This sentiment was illuminated by a participant stating, “it was just a life-changing experience, and I think everyone needs to experience something like that” (P10). All students unanimously agreed that the experience was beneficial in that they all learned a considerable amount, enjoyed their experience immensely, and would highly recommend such a trip to anyone. Some even stated it was the best thing they had ever done, and a few of them were already planning to raise money so they could revisit Myanmar. These student responses seemingly underscore the value of the cross-cultural immersion experience. Moreover, it is noteworthy that all students painted a broadly similar picture of their personal experience in Myanmar. Many of the themes identified remained consistent across most of the participants interviewed; the data paint a rich picture of the experience. Relatedly and importantly, the cohesion of qualitative results also seems to suggest that the participants’ shared experience implies the occurrence of a phenomenon.

5. Discussion

This section evaluates and interprets the results outlined in Section 4 and discusses them in light of the literature presented in Section 2. This discussion also addresses research limitations and identifies opportunities for future research. Furthermore, the goal of this section is to capture the essence of the participants’ lived experience with substance, life, colour, depth, and character, not just as a rigid formulated response. The critical analysis presented here is organised into four subsections: intercultural competence (IC); emotional intelligence (EI); application of this research to current affairs; and limitations, recommendations, and future opportunities.

Table 4 provides a visual representation of the three key components (KCs) of IC and the four KCs of EI and demonstrates their relationship to the six key themes (KTs) above. This table thereby establishes a linkage between the KCs of IC and EI and the six KT from Table 3.

Table 4. Visual summary of convergence between key themes (KTs) and key components (KCs) of IC and EI.

Key Themes (KTs)	Key Components (KCs) Intercultural Competence (IC)				Key Components (KCs) Emotional Intelligence (EI)		
	Knowledge	Skills	Attitudes	Self-Awareness	Self-Management	Social-Awareness	Relationship-Management
1	x		x	x	x	x	
2	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
3	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
4	x	x	x	x	x	x	
5	x		x	x	x	x	
6	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

5.1. Intercultural Competence (IC)

The research identified many positive impacts on the participants, including how readily and often participants discussed their connection with the children in Myanmar and how this connection impinged on their worldview. These changes in worldview included becoming more curious and respectful of the other culture, seeing the world through the “eyes” of others, making intentional changes to own behaviours, a more in-depth understanding of the world, and a change in attitude towards other cultures and one’s own. The connection with the children in Myanmar seemed to be the catalyst for much of the expressed changes in the participants. Interview responses suggested that this connection directly resulted from the immersive experience, which was enhanced by the participants’

willingness to engage with the children at the orphanage. All students discussed the strong connections they had made with the children in Myanmar. The participant who commented that differences in culture are “not wrong, just different” (P11) also noted, “it’s good to see something that’s so good, that’s different, to realise that maybe your way is not the best way” (P11). In that sense, it may be theorised that the immersive experience enhanced, broadened and more fully informed the students’ knowledge and attitudes towards cultural difference in a positive and respectful way.

Relatedly, so-called “transformational” experiences require more than just “showing up” (Terry 2020). Research by Chinnappan et al. (2013) suggests that immersion alone may not provide the stimulus needed for learning; careful attention must also be given to the pre- and post-management of such programs. According to Terry (2020), these programs require not only energy, effort, and commitment but also proper preparation of the participants to maximise educational gains. In this case, the trip was intentionally planned to allow for the development of global understanding, including gratefulness (Trip Leader 1). The leaders included daily debriefs to provide the students with ample opportunities for learning and reflection (Trip Leader 1). Willingness to learn and intentional preparation are key to unlocking the benefits of the immersive experience and IC (Potts 2016). The trip leader illustrated how the immersive experience was the major catalyst for reducing the participants’ ethnocentric attitudes because they are now more readily

“able to say, ‘I am a global citizen’, it actually just created like a whole new world because they actually physically travelled to another part and you’re surrounded by people who don’t speak your language. You’re in an environment where you have to problem solve, you have to think for yourself, but you also need to really assess, who you are as an Australian.” (Trip Leader 1)

The students’ interview responses demonstrated growth in their knowledge of other cultures, skills in engaging with other cultures, and a more ethnorelative attitude towards other cultures. A key lesson that all students mentioned was how they perceived their own culture as materialistic. Some questioned the ingrained cultural ideology that “things can make people happy”. This idea is supported by Picardo (2012), who states that such experiences may nurture “more rounded individuals, encouraging our pupils to see things from different perspectives and helping them to make informed decisions, acquiring transferable skills that will be useful to them and will remain with them for life” (para. 10). This also supports the formation of interdisciplinary awareness (Chen and Luetz 2020).

This study illuminates the connection between lived experience and the fullness of cross-cultural learning. There was a sentiment expressed by both students and leaders that the concepts explored and the worldview-altering experience they had undergone could not have occurred inside the walls of a classroom or be learned from a textbook; they needed to be experienced to be completely understood. This concept is encapsulated by the student who stated, “you can’t learn it from a book or a photo, you have to go into it” (P13). All students interviewed expressed a hope that future students would be given a similar opportunity, stating, “it was just a life-changing experience, and I think everyone needs to experience something like that” (P10). They all indicated that they valued and appreciated the benefits obtained from their cross-cultural experience (cf. Getz 2020).

Deardorff conceptualised three constituent elements of IC: knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Deardorff 2006, 2008, 2011, 2020). This research posits that there may be a fourth constituent element—the immersive experience, which cogently informs the other three. Combining the ideas of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (Boaheng 2020; Luetz and Leo 2021) and Deardorff’s three constituent elements of IC (Deardorff 2006), this research formulates the idea of a quadrilateral to visually conceptualise a fourth element of IC: experience (Figure 5). While knowledge, skills and attitudes may be acquired in a classroom context, “experience” is most meaningfully attained via immersive learning or embodied pedagogical approaches (Costello 2020; McKenzie and Woods 2009; Canfield et al. 2009; Alexander et al. 2005; Prosek and Michel 2016). According to Costello (2020), the “embodied learning approach moves beyond using travel as a simple practical necessity for visiting

multiple sites towards using the act of travel itself as a pedagogical tool that imparts a visceral, embodied knowledge of landscapes and the layers of meaning with which they are inscribed.” (p. 1418). Furthermore, [Barden and Cashwell \(2013\)](#) state that, “theoretical support for cultural immersion is grounded in Allport’s ‘contact hypothesis’ ([Allport 1954](#)), which emphasizes that experiencing diversity through experiential methods is more effective than didactic methods of learning that focus primarily just on reading and discussion” (p. 289). In this sense, the findings are supportive of the view that immersive experience is both a fourth constituent element (Figure 5) and a conduit to IC (Figure 6). A good example of this is the provision of practicum- or work placement subjects in higher education settings, whereby the professional immersive experiences become both a constituent part and conduit to learning. This notion is additionally captured by [Potts \(2016\)](#), who conceptualises “learning abroad [as] an inclusive term that encompasses overseas study, international work experience, internships, practicum placements, volunteering, community service and other learning endeavours where students remain enrolled at their home institution while travelling abroad for a component of their home degree” (p. 4).



Figure 5. Based on [Deardorff \(2006\)](#), the Nelson Quadrilateral conceptualises four constituent elements of intercultural competence: knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experience.



Figure 6. Deardorff (2006) three constituent elements of intercultural competence (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) may be visualised as being directly informed by the central role played by fully embodied interculturally immersive experiences.

The findings from this research have demonstrated a connection between experiential learning and the formation of IC. The question then arises whether other forms of learning can engender similar results. This question becomes more relevant now in the wake of travel restrictions brought on by the global COVID-19 pandemic (Unger et al. 2021). Could there be other avenues that foster such learning without the expense and/or effort of overseas travel? For example, could a suburban, majority Caucasian, middle-class school in Australia engage with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community for similar mutual benefit? Such options might significantly reduce the cost barrier often associated with such experiences. Considering the requisites for international travel, such as airfares, visas, immunisations, and insurance, among others, domestic cross-cultural experiences may require significantly less time and resources to undertake than intercontinental travel, which is the only alternative option available in Australia².

Finally, questions arise on the prospects of nurturing IC in a post-COVID-19 global context, where travel options might remain enduringly curtailed (Leal Filho et al. 2020). Is it possible to cultivate IC using technology (e.g., video conferencing) to facilitate cross-cultural experiences? Nelson and Luetz (2021) posit that virtual conferencing, without the nuances of body language, eye contact and the manifold almost intangible interpersonal

interactions, “can never be a complete substitute for true, immersive, and full-bodied cross-cultural experience” (Nelson and Luetz 2021, p. 413). Nevertheless, a limited vision of the world (and other people) through a camera lens and computer screen may still be preferable to having no vision or interaction at all (Dede 2009; Unger et al. 2021; Nelson and Luetz 2021).

Relatedly, Deardorff (2020) recently pilot-tested the idea of so-called “Story Circles” for the development of IC. By “cultivating intercultural dialogue through the strengthening of interaction and understanding across differences” (Deardorff 2020, p. x), participants reported that they had acquired strong skills for tolerance, empathy, critical thinking, and listening for understanding. Story Circles require facilitators from different cultural backgrounds who have been trained and are willing to teach others to explore cultural similarities and differences with respect (Deardorff 2020). The Story Circles approach appears to be reminiscent of the interactive IC group exercise “BaFa BaFa”, which is an intercultural

“face-to-face learning simulation. It is intended to improve participants’ cultural competency by helping them understand the impact of culture on the behaviour of people and organizations. Participants experience ‘culture shock’ by travelling to and trying to interact with a culture in which the people have different values, different ways of behaving and different ways of solving problems.”. (Erasmus n.d., para. 1)

Evidently, approaches that simulate immersive cross-cultural experiences such as Story Circles or BaFa BaFa are subject to benefits and limitations. The benefits are obvious, given that such approaches are relatively low-effort and low-cost, in addition to involving low emissions of greenhouse gasses, and thus represent a form of so-called carbon neutral education (Baumber et al. 2020). On the other hand, one might question whether such simulations can offer a sufficient level of cross-cultural “immersion” and might, therefore, ultimately not provide a true immersive experience, thus limiting the development of IC, as formulated above (Dede 2009).

This research suggests that the participants interviewed did increase their IC, thus highlighting the significant interplay between the immersive experience and the formation of IC. The interview data reflect a change in the participants’ attitudes towards more nuanced cultural sensitivity, awareness, respect and, ultimately, competence. The question, therefore, arises whether educators can mainstream such experiences into high school curricular designs. While there are evidently numerous curricular approaches available for the formation and development of IC, there is support in the literature for fully embodied immersive experiences in relation to both people and places that offer numerous sustainability benefits (Buxton et al. 2021; Costello 2020; Rathunde 2009; Scoffham 2020).

5.2. Emotional Intelligence (EI)

The second component of the research question addressed the impact of short-term cross-cultural experiences on the development of EI in Australian high school students. Both the literature and findings of this study lend support to the idea that only “immersive experience” can truly reach and teach the human heart about the value of human connection (Levine 2009; Getz 2020; Luetz et al. 2020). A well-designed immersive experience can provide situations where participants must confront their cultural biases, be they conscious or unconscious (White-Means et al. 2009). An immersive experience supported by critical reflection enhances not only the development of IC but also of EI. Importantly, EI needs to be cultivated and complemented through critical reflection and growing self-awareness (such as the debrief time included at the end of every day in “The Myanmar Experience”), which can support changes in thinking and behaviour, resulting in increased empathy, open-mindedness, tolerance, and resilience (Dolby 2008; Mayer et al. 2008; Kitsantas 2004; Zamastil-Vondrova 2011; Potts 2016; Chieffo and Griffiths 2004; Fairchild et al. 2006; Zimmermann and Neyer 2013). The participants not only reported a gain in IC and EI as a direct result of this experience but also stated it was one of the richest experiences of

their lives so far. This sentiment is echoed in other studies (Goleman 1995; Kraft 1997; Zamastil-Vondrova 2011; Epprecht and Tiessen 2012).

There is some debate surrounding the idea that travel makes one more empathic (Terry 2020). However, it can be argued that cross-cultural exposure through the medium of travel would at least create more favourable conditions for recognising, reviewing and revising one's biases. Furthermore, Küpers and Wee (2018) observe that immersive experiences have "pathic qualities . . . evoking (sym-)pathetic resonances and responses" (p. 388). There are indications raised by this research that the immersive experience did nurture elements of EI, such as empathy, compassion, gratitude, a sense of community, personal growth, and an expansive understanding of a multiethnic worldview.

Relatedly, all participants interviewed expressed that they had made some changes to their lives following their return to Australia as a direct result of their cross-cultural experiences. Some of them also expressed an increased level of gratitude for the opportunities and resources available to them because they live in Australia. These included access to clean water, sanitation, healthy food, and education. Their attitudes seemed to have shifted somewhat from striving for more material wealth to greater contentment and gratitude for their current circumstances. One participant expressed this by saying, "over here . . . we've got so much more, but [we are] still so unhappy and complaining about what [we] don't have, and not really grateful for what [we] do have" (P10). In the literature, Hemingway (1952) expressed this attitude by saying, "Now is no time to think of what you do not have. Think of what you can do with what there is" (p. 41). Relatedly, some of the most notable changes made by the participants included their excitement to be involved with their school's Cash for Container program³, changes to diet and clothing choices, and their newfound or strengthened gratefulness for education.

This again invites the question whether disembodied forms of learning⁴ can attain similar results (Ehrlich 1997; Rathunde 2009; Costello 2020). The analysis appears to converge around the synthesis that although "travel may not inspire enough empathy to turn tourists into social justice activists, the alternative—not travelling at all—may actually be worse" (Terry 2020, para. 23). This is because overseas travel can be seen as the quintessential fully embodied immersive experience, which has a profound educative effect (Costello 2020, Küpers and Wee 2018). Or, in the words of Langewiesche (2011), "So much of who we are is where we have been" (p. 60).

5.3. Application of this Research to Current Affairs

During the course of this research, the world was met by two large global crises that directly relate to this topic: the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The BLM movement has served as a reminder that racial bias, both known and unknown, is far more socioculturally embedded than is typically assumed (Shapiro 2020; Miller 2020; Brownlee 2020). According to UNESCO (2013),

"The costs of intercultural incompetence are so high . . . the future of cultural diversity, respectful of human rights in our social world, depends upon our ability to gain and demonstrate intercultural competencies today." (p. 38)

This theme of looking beyond utilitarian self-interest was similarly highlighted by Martin Luther King Jr., who advocated transpersonal or even transnational perspectives: "An individual has not begun to live until he can rise above the narrow horizons of his particular individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity" (King 1957, p. 250). King emphasised that education must support character formation; "The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character is the goal of true education" (King 1947, p. 124). The manifold problems linked to enduring individualistic and systemic racism underscore the need to expand, consolidate, and intensify efforts to foster intercultural dialogue (Tutu 1991). Deardorff (2020) asks,

"What does it take to live together peacefully? How can we bridge societal divides that only seem to be increasing? How can we understand others better, especially those whose beliefs and practices may be quite different? And what

can be done to intentionally enhance others' ability to live and work together across differences that seem to separate and at times engulf humans, leading to conflict and even war?" (p. 1)

While UNESCO is attempting to answer some of these questions, much of the work is still in its infancy (Deardorff 2020). The empirical evidence of this research suggests one way to answer some of Deardorff's questions while, at the same time, highlighting to policymakers and education stakeholders some of the benefits of integrating experiential cross-cultural experiences into high school curricula. Doing so offers prospects that promise to effectively redress the widespread and deeply embedded prevalence of racial ignorance, xenophobia, prejudice, and discrimination.

5.4. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

As noted above, the COVID-19 pandemic imposed limitations on the collection of data. While the study had intended to include two different population samples collected from participants of two distinct trips, due to the sudden onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the second group cancelled their planned overseas experience indefinitely. At the time of preparing this research for publication, it is currently still prohibited for Australian citizens or permanent residents to travel overseas due to government-mandated COVID-19 border restrictions⁵. It is, therefore, not currently possible to collect more data samples from Australian cohorts. This presents an opportunity to repeat this or similar studies in the future after border closures have been eased and global air travel from and to Australia returns to some sense of normalcy. Despite this externally imposed limitation, the study findings are nevertheless valid and reliable (Punch 2014; Bryman 2016; Babbie 2021), albeit ultimately subject to a smaller sample than the authors had envisaged and wished for.

Furthermore, both students and leaders reported that the TEQ questionnaire was confusing and difficult to answer. The investigators attribute this sentiment to the fact that the TEQ was designed for university students. Future studies engaging with high school students might, therefore, amend and pre-test the TEQ so that it is readily comprehensible by this age group. The participation of only one male student in the study can also be seen as an opportunity to repeat the study with more gender balance.

A further barrier when participating in cross-cultural experiences is the monetary cost. This was mentioned by some of the students and the leaders. As discussed above (Section 5.1), the possibility of travelling to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities would provide a lower-cost alternative opportunity against a background of comparably rich cultural diversity. Accordingly, future research might investigate such immersive experiences within Australia (e.g., indigenous communities). Such research would also enable comparative analyses both within and across countries and cultures.

Finally, there are opportunities for further research that encompass bigger and more diverse population samples, different experience locations, immersive timeframes, and participatory activities to allow for more nuanced theory generation, in addition to longitudinal research that tracks the impact of the participants' experiences over time and into the future.

6. Concluding Synthesis: Prospects for Interracial Understanding

The cultivation of IC is of global importance at this current time in history (OECD 2018; Deardorff 2020). This study has provided empirical evidence that lends support to initiatives aimed at cultivating IC and EI in Australian high school students through immersive cross-cultural experiences. This research has focused on how IC and EI were enhanced by the students' participation in their cross-cultural experience in Myanmar with their high school. It also discussed the components of IC and EI (Table 4) and offered examples of how the students grew in those areas. These results highlight the value and impact of such trips for the formation of IC and EI in high school students.

This study explored multiple themes that emerged organically from the research, including (1) sensitisation to happiness and contentment; (2) sensitisation to community;

(3) sensitisation to learning and education; (4) sensitisation to culture; (5) an overarching sense of gratitude; and (6) the overall importance of the immersive experience. The findings suggest that short-term, cross-cultural experiences can be effective in helping students to function as more enlightened, sensitised, and responsible global citizens in today's complex, multipolar, and multicultural world. Furthermore, it can be expected that as our world continues to globalise in the future (should this be possible in a COVID-19 regulated geopolitical climate), the demands for more IC-enhancing experiences, not only from students but also from employers, may continue to increase (Kitsantas 2004; Unger and Luetz 2019). Even so, Nelson and Luetz (2021) caution that it may be impossible to "exhaustively analyse (let alone answer) how a post-COVID-19 future may impact IC-formation" (p. 413). Most obviously, the main question is if/how relevant research can be meaningfully carried out if international travel and interpersonal contact should remain enduringly curtailed in the wake of the (still unfolding) pandemic (Section 5.4; cf. Daoud 2020). This is clearly a challenge that future research will need to overcome.

The literature review of this study noted a clear knowledge gap on IC formation in the Australian high school context. More specifically, "growth in participation in these trips has not been matched by academic attention or analysis" (Campbell-Price 2014, p. i). In synthesis, the foregoing research analysis converges around the understanding that more empirical research into the impacts of cross-cultural exposure travel is needed to better comprehend the IC formation of high school students in Australia and beyond (Dolby 2008). Against this literary background, data collection was undertaken for this study. The quantitative analysis from the GENE Scale supports the research hypothesis that cross-cultural experiences can reduce ethnocentricity in young people. While the results of the TEQ test were more ambivalent, which we hypothesise resulted from the administration of a higher education instrument in the context of a high school participant cohort (Section 5.4), triangulated analysis nevertheless broadly supports the findings that cross-cultural experiences are conducive to the formation of IC and may inversely reduce ethnocentric ideation.

Furthermore, qualitative data analysis additionally suggests that such experiences can have a positive impact on the IC and EI of participants. Many of the themes were consistent and cohesive across most of the interviews. This cohesion of qualitative results suggests that the participants' shared experiences imply the occurrence of a "phenomenon", rendered measurable by the study's in-depth phenomenological research design (Bryman 2016). Other benefits emphasised by the participants included informed career choice, the value of experiential learning, and the importance of reflection and debriefing.

This research offers a greater understanding of the linkages between immersive cross-cultural experiences and IC, which holds the promise that policymakers, educators, pastoral carers, and other stakeholders may more effectively leverage such experiential learning in support of interculturally harmonious human relations. As such, there arises support for complementing Deardorff (2006, 2008, 2011, 2020) three constituent elements of IC (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) with a fourth element—experience (Figure 5).

In today's classrooms, preference is overwhelmingly given to cognitive educational strategies. At the same time, recent racial protests have demonstrated that xenophobic issues can have both "systemic" and "academic" undercurrents (Harmon et al. 2020). IC-enhancing experiences and immersive or embodied pedagogies may be more adept at engendering and sustaining interculturally attuned and congenial human behaviours (Buxton et al. 2021; Costello 2020; Rathunde 2009; Scoffham 2020). This research promotes a foray into "soulful" educational experiences with and, importantly, *in* other countries and cultures, which offers compelling prospects for augmented IC, stronger intercultural literacy, and, ultimately, more interculturally sympathetic human behaviours (Figure 6).

By extension, this research asks whether alternative approaches, simulations, and games, while capable of developing some level of IC, can match the impact of embodied and immersive experiences (Nelson and Luetz 2021; Buxton et al. 2021; Dede 2009; Scoffham 2020; Unger et al. 2021). As such, this research concludes that cultivating IC and EI in

Australian high school students, as elsewhere, can be meaningfully supported through such experiences, wherefore they might be more proactively mainstreamed into high school pedagogies and curricula than is presently the case.

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Notes

- ¹ In the context of higher education, “short-term” can be longer, lasting up to one semester, often involving formal classes.
- ² The authors’ use of the word “domestic” in relation to Australia should be taken to include the notion that the Commonwealth of Australia, a country comprising the mainland of the Australian continent, Tasmania and several smaller islands, additionally comprises many dozens of other “language, social or nation groups of Aboriginal Australia” (AIATSIS 1996, para. 1); <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia> (accessed on 18 June 2021).
- ³ This program rewards those who return eligible recyclables to specific deposit points with a 10-cent refund (Envirobank Recycling 2020).
- ⁴ According to Rathunde (2009), disembodied education connotes “the lack of integration of experiential, affective, and other body-based activities that could improve education and make it more well rounded” (p. 71).
- ⁵ “If you are an Australian citizen or a permanent resident, you cannot leave Australia due to COVID-19 restrictions unless you have an exemption.”; <https://covid19.homeaffairs.gov.au/leaving-australia#toc-8> (para. 8) (accessed on 16 June 2021).

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